

Notes on Freedom, Performance, and Composition, with a Nod to Pauline Oliveros

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I.

Questions of artistry and the origin of an impulse that makes us emotional in our individual music-making become threatened, perhaps of extinction, without provocation. Knowing that both impulses of performing music as well as composing, under normal conditions, are experiences much like our regular life experiences in that they involve feeling happy, sad, vulnerable, angry, elated, and so on, I contend that an approach to performance is an odyssey of mystery and challenge that reminds us of the wonders of music.

II.

It is possible to believe that music as a process of transformation could evolve someday to carry you to heaven, as La Monte Young reminded a generation before us.ⁱ As a composer, I remind myself that it's necessary to make provisions not only for the noteheads, the staff paper, the barlines, the signatures of meters, and all other kinds of diverse minutia as such (could these be the obstacles to musical meaning?) but for musicians. Musicians who, under realistic conditions, do translate composed works, from paper to air through body and time, already have created a poetry of their own. The dint of their inner knowledge that allows such a translation to begin has the same effect on their heart and soul, and continues the same idea, even when we imagine that it never ends.

Charles Ives, perhaps the greatest musician who knew well our essentially American tradition of breaking rules, knew even more referencing Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau, the Alcotts when he wrote his well known and rightly cherished "Concord Sonata". Music's

family of famous and not-so-famous names now offers the opportunity to bring people together, as Ives brought us together, peopling his music with so many others.

III.

One such living composer whose success in this effort reminds me of the bringing together in music is Pauline Oliveros. When Pauline met me two summers ago in New York preparing for her Lunar Opera, she offered up a philosophy of performing during rehearsal that struck me as well grounded in precisely the kind of issues that are now at stake. It was a philosophy of acceptance, but not one of convention, and Pauline's musical suggestions and statements brought the act of listening, her intention, and her musicality to all involved during the opera. It was a ritual of listening rooted deeply within to an inner sense, and expressing the interior sense to the exterior world.

IV.

But what is the question here? Are we threatened by a generational shift? My sense is that when a composer feels compelled by tides of history, and sees within himself a new limit of artistic freedom, he must effectively smash the limit, if only to convey his breakthrough for the culture. And when that happens, when the composer stakes this claim to liberty, the aesthetics of American music-making will have advanced just that much further toward the ever expanding, imperfect horizon of our time.

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ⁱ Kostelanetz, *Theater of Mixed Means*, p. 218